SOUTHWESTERN CULTURE MUST NOT BE A CULT

A WORK of art (let the word include literature for convenience) automatically belongs to any individual just in proportion as it has significance for that individual. Today the range of interests and appreciations of the ordinary intelligent person of education, so far transcends the limits of his sectional background that it is as natural to

him to appreciate a large amount of "imported" art as that which is native for him. Unless you restrict the word "imported" to mean art which is so foreign to the observer that it demands an artificial cultivation to comprehend it, it seems to me "imported" art has as specific a place in the culture of any modern community as the art which is its most indigenous expression. The place of "imported" art and its importance in the general scheme should be clearly kept in mind in any discussion of native art.

Just because the appreciation of art is rooted in its significance, the intimate knowledge which every man has of his own country, the vast number of first-hand impressions of its nature, its people, and its traditions which are stored in his memory prepare in him a particularly rich response to autochthonous artistic expression. He, better than anyone else, has the background to perceive all the delicate shadings which an artist may achieve in expressing this native world. And, in turn, the artist reveals to him values in his everyday life which constantly illumine it. The appreciation of art in each of us properly begins and ends in the art which springs from that intimate world into which we have been born.

Our region, unquestionably, is particularly rich in material for a distinctive native art. It has been colored by the march of five vivid peoples. Its scenery and atmosphere, if not unique, are at least intensely characteristic, and its life is sufficiently independent of other regions to make for a highly personal expression. No section of America has greater artistic possibilities; indeed, a rich expression in art seems inevitable.

There is one danger, however, which enthusiasts for artistic development in the Southwest need to guard against —a thing which will make us slightly ridiculous if we are not careful. Perhaps it is our youth. Perhaps it is our intoxication with the recent happy discovery that we can have

an art of our own. Whatever it is, there are signs that "Southwestern culture" is tending toward becoming a cult. At least, this anxiety to mark off boundaries, to tag each new plant and classify it with professorial exactness in relation to all history, is putting the cart before the horse.

The Elizabethans did not stop to wonder whether the England of their day was to have a distinctive literature when they were writing their plays. The very questions "Can London have a literature?" "Can Paris have a literature?" sound naïve. We can hardly think that they ever occurred to those who contributed most to the glory of London or Paris.

If the Southwest does achieve an art that wins general recognition as something distinctive, it is likely to be done by the artists who simply express what they find around them to express without ever being conscious that they are creating a special kind of culture. By all means let us encourage every worthy artistic expression. Let us give it every practical recognition we can. Let us have our magazines, our art exhibitions; and let the most interesting works find their way into the schoolroom. But in the name of good taste, let us wait until we have some body of art to the credit of our region before we try to sum it up and prophesy its limits and boundaries. We are not ready to take stock. We have hardly begun; yet we are already beginning to be self-conscious—to foster self-consciousness in our young artists.

It is enough now that our young men and women have begun to try to express the world they find around them. Let us enjoy these expressions for what they obviously are and leave definitive estimates—at which we cannot possibly arrive—to those who come after us. We have art already—there is no doubt of that—but we must avoid looking at it as English professors do when they lecture on a dead period of literature. And above all, we should see to it that we do

not go about proclaiming each stage of our artistic gestation like a glorified Chamber of Commerce.

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